Action For Refugees In Lewisham

STRATEGIC PLAN 2022 - 2026

External context

Lewisham became a Borough of Sanctuary in May 2021 committing to welcoming those fleeing violence and persecution in their own countries and protecting the rights of all migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.. AFRIL is proud to be part of such a diverse borough: around 20% of Lewisham residents were born outside the UK. This diversity contributes to a vibrant culture within the borough. Those born abroad have very varied reasons for coming to the UK, and experiences in the UK. The borough hosts resettled Syrian and Afghan refugees, and those who were granted refugee status after difficult journeys through the UK asylum system. It hosts asylum seekers, many waiting years for the resolution of their claim for protection: some living with families, and, more recently, hundreds in short to medium term hotel accommodation. It hosts a large number of undocumented migrants, as well as very many on the human rights based “ten year route” to status. Each of these groups has diverse needs.

AFRIL works with a diverse group of families and individuals but one thing that they all have in common is that their immigration status negatively affects their lives - and is a key factor in reducing the life chances of the children in the family. Clients come to us seeking support with a multitude of issues including access to housing and income, regularising their immigration status in the UK, integration, wellbeing support, and issues pertaining to children’s education.

At the time of writing, 72% of the families we support had insecure immigration status when first accessing our services. 56% of these clients had no legal representation, due to the huge cuts to the free legal advice sector since 2012. Without legal representation, it is almost impossible to gain leave to remain in the UK. 12% of our clients last year were newly resettled refugee families from Syria, who were able to come to the UK due to their increased vulnerabilities, and who face an uphill battle to adjust to life in their new country. On first accessing AFRIL services, 61% of families were on an extremely low income, with 38% in receipt of no financial support whatsoever, reliant on borrowing from friends. In terms of housing 47% were homeless, illegally renting or in temporary accommodation.

Lewisham has a diverse charitable sector supporting this group. AFRIL works collaboratively to meet the need, however the sector as a whole is under-resourced. Key gaps include access to immigration legal advice, access to cash/food/housing to meet basic needs, and problems for clients transitioning to mainstream support with limited help. Covid-19 has placed incredible pressure on the sector. AFRIL is proud of the way in which we have met and continue to meet the challenges of the pandemic, for example networking and collaboration developed by our Food Bank Programme and new volunteers who donated

their time delivering food parcels whilst on furlough However, meeting the additional client needs during the pandemic has taken its toll on charity reserves when emergency covid funding runs out, and much of the work that had been done on partnership and enhanced services more broadly in our sector has not survived as charities are forced to pull back to their core work.

The UK government's hostile environment policies, coupled with austerity, has seen the situation worsen for our client group since our last strategic review. The placement of asylum applicants in local Lewisham hotels is one symptom of this, but there is also a significant group who are living underground because of lack of status, problems resolving immigration status, difficulties accessing healthcare, and massive housing issues. At the time of writing, the asylum backlog stands at over 70,000 people waiting over six months for their claim, effectively putting them in limbo. Our clients regularly raise concerns over the complex and distressing nature of the asylum process, as well as delays which can cause unnecessary periods of stress and destitution. The Nationality and Borders Bill looks to further worsen that situation, penalising those who seek asylum outside settlement schemes, condemning them to short-term leave to remain with no rights to benefits, as well as further punishing undocumented migrants - and their children, even when they are born in the UK.

Review against last strategic plan

Our strategic aims for 2018-21 supported AFRIL to become an effective small charity, able to meet the challenges of the 2020 pandemic. Looking forward, we want to build on these strengths.

STRATEGIC AIMS 2022-2026

Strategic Aim 1: Support people to transition from dependence to independence

AFRIL works with some of the most vulnerable people in the borough - indeed, in our society. We want to ensure that members of this group are able to live safe, meaningful lives in the heart of the community, and part of this is helping them to transition from dependence on a range of services to living as independently as they can. Our services are well placed to meet this need.

We will ensure that our advice services and immigration legal services enable people to sustainably resolve the issues creating dependence. Our wellbeing activities will enable people to build confidence and resilience. The Rainbow Club Parents' Forum will support parents to understand the education system and advocate for their children's needs.

Our aspirations are to grow our services to develop clients' independence. We would like to look at increasing capabilities in financial management and digital access, as well as improving skills through employability and volunteering work. We would like to support independence through enabling service users to access low cost food and other critical items. We would like to explore and learn from models such as social supermarkets to achieve this. We want to continue to develop our Allotment of Refuge programme of food growing, volunteer opportunities, learning and workshops for families to increase their

wellbeing, capacity and resilience. We want to build on and expand our existing partnership work to support the development and improvement of external services so they are more accessible and relevant to our client group.

Our approach to service delivery is one of co-production. We support our beneficiaries to make informed choices, share tools of resilience, proactively seek feedback and views on service development, and provide structured and informal opportunities for peer support. This increases client influence and ownership over the services they access. The approach is shared across our core services but we would like to build on and embed this more comprehensively.

Strategic Aim 2: Meet crisis need

Given that the people with whom AFRIL works are some of the most vulnerable members of the community, we are proud that we have developed relationships of trust with those who often avoid mainstream services; many are living “underground”. While we want to support people to full independence, we recognise that it is also critical to meet their needs in crisis. As a small charity with part time staff we already punch above our weight, providing over 1500 food parcels every year. We want to maintain and develop these services, while also ensuring that we maintain our longer term work to facilitate independence.

Our aims for 2022-25 include ensuring that our foodbank project continues to develop and grow, reaching the most vulnerable and working in partnership with others locally to ensure all those in food poverty can meet their needs. We want to continue to work in partnership to ensure that asylum seekers resident in local hotels can meet their crisis needs while in the borough and look at models of earlier intervention to prevent crises from occurring. We want our advice and advocacy services to meaningfully help those in crisis as a first step to independence. We want to develop wellbeing services, again in partnership, to meet emotional crises. Finally we want to work towards meeting crisis needs with regards to money, through developing projects and relationships that can ensure individuals do not have recourse to loan sharks or get into debt.

Strategic Aim 3: Advocate with and for our clients

AFRIL is proud of our work with some of the most hard to reach communities in Lewisham and South East London. We want to use the value of our unique work to advocate for better systems for asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants in Lewisham and, where possible and appropriate, beyond. This has been an area that we have not been able to develop, due to limited resources - an aspiration for the next three years is to do more, better. We are aware that this is aspirational and may need additional resources - we are committed to exploring this.

This work involves improving our partnership working in Lewisham and neighbouring boroughs, and working towards strong information sharing, shared advocacy, and policy influencing. We want to use our data and case studies to support campaigning locally and nationally, building on relationships we have developed in the past year with relevant forums.

We want to amplify our service users' expertise by experience, enabling their voice to be heard to influence policy and practice. Finally, we want to use our knowledge and resources to change the narrative around migration and facilitate better understanding of migration issues within the wider community.

Strategic Aim 4: Maintain a sustainable and effective organisation

AFRIL is a small charity that punches above its weight. In order to do so, internal policies and processes must be robust and effective, and reviewed regularly. This has been a recent area of focus, and we have seen very significant improvement. Our aspirations for the next three years are to continue on this trajectory, embedding processes and practices and making improvements where we can.

This includes, but is not limited to: ongoing work to ensure the relevance and review the use of policies; pursuing accreditations and improving our accreditations for key services; robust financial and fundraising planning and management; review and deploy monitoring and evaluation across services to ensure they meet our needs; strong governance; ongoing work to ensure the coherence of our services, including continuing to improve co-working and communication. In order to maintain our talent we are committed to enhancing the support we provide to staff and volunteers including increasing our staff wellbeing offer and pursuing relevant quality marks. Finally, we want to embed service user involvement at every level. This has been a continuing aspiration, but our limited capacity and the vulnerability of our service users mean that developing practices is complex. We are committed to continuing to work towards meaningful service user involvement.

Approved by AFRIL's Board of Trustees, 13.09.2021